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Are You Seeing Him/Her? Mate Choice in Visually Impaired and Blind People

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ABSTRACT

We examined whether individuals who are VI (visually impaired; people with low vision or totally blind) choose their romantic partners differently than those who are sighted. The theoretical framework that informed our inquiry is Social Exchange Theory. Fifty-five participants who are VI and fifty-one participants who are sighted were administered mate preference and marital satisfaction questionnaires. Participants who are VI also answered open-ended questions regarding difficulties in finding a suitable mate. Participants who are VI did not significantly differ from participants who are sighted in their rated importance of traits of an ideal romantic partner, as well as their relationship satisfaction. No tradeoff of resources among participants who are VI and their partners was found, i.e. they did not “pay” for their disability by coupling with a partner who has a lower socio-economic status than theirs. Participants who were VI told about their main difficulties in finding a mate and offered proposals to mitigate these difficulties. We conclude by proposing ways to help individuals who are VI to establish intimate relationships.

KEYWORDS

Blindness; visual impairment; mate choice; reading aloud questionnaire; romantic relationship; social exchange

Introduction

Romantic relationships are important to most individuals, including those with physical disabilities (Kef & Bos, 2006; Piquart & Pfeiffer, 2011, 2012; Trelfa, 2004). This research focuses on mate choice among individuals who are visually impaired (VI).¹ It is based on extensive earlier studies, which indicated that individuals involved in long-term relationships² experience positive psychological and health outcomes, more so than people who are not in such relationships. For example, individuals who are married are less likely to be depressed, as well as have lower suicide rates and physical health problems, than those who are not married. They are also more likely to report happiness, and have a longer life span (Braithwaite, Delevi, & Fincham, 2010; Cairney, Thorpe, Rietschlin, & Avison, 1999; Kaplan & Kronick, 2006; Smith, Mercy, & Conn, 1988; Stack & Eshleman, 1998). One way for individuals who are VI to enhance their well-being is, therefore, by forming long-term intimate relationships with romantic partners.

Mate choice studies show that individuals of both genders want their partner to be kind, understanding, dependable, sociable, emotionally stable, and intelligent. They also want their partner to be honest, affectionate, considerate, loyal, and interesting (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997; Buss, Abbott, Angleitner, Asherian, & Biaggio et al., 1990; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Conroy-Beam & Buss, 2016). Beyond these similarities, gender differences prevail in a wide variety of societies and cultures with regard to mate choice. Buss et al.'s (1990) intercultural study examined more than 10,000 individuals from 33 countries spanning six continents, and found that men value physical attractiveness more than women, while women seem to be generally more selective. Women also value the earning capacity of their prospective partner more than men (see also, Buss, 1999; Conroy-Beam & Buss, 2016; Conroy-Beam, Buss, Pham, & Shackelford, 2015; Fales et al., 2016; Fletcher, Tither, O'Loughlin, Friesen, & Overall, 2004; Jonason, 2009; Li, Valentine, & Patel, 2011). Traits that women seek in their long-term mates include economic resources, good financial prospects, high social status, older age, ambition and industriousness, dependability and stability, athletic prowess, good health, love, and willingness to invest in children. In contrast to this relatively extensive list, men merely seek three characteristics in long-term mates: (a) Youth and younger age than themselves (related to fecundity and childbearing ability); (b) Physical attractiveness, which includes large eyes, small nose and chin, prominent cheekbones, thick lips, thin eyebrows, as well as symmetry and averageness of size of body and face parts (Baudouin & Tiberghien, 2004; Jasienska, Lipson, Ellison, Thune, & Ziolkiewicz, 2006; Komori, Kawamura, & Ishihara, 2009); and (c) Particular body shape, which was found to be associated with fecundity and childbearing (i.e. being slim and having a low waist-to-hip ratio). These gender differences are cross-culturally robust and prevail even in societies with high levels of gender equality (Conroy-Beam et al., 2015).

Mate Choice among People Who are Disabled

Difficulties in finding an intimate partner arise for individuals who are VI. For example, a study of 330 college students indicated that individuals who are sighted think more negatively and feel less comfortable in dating contexts that involve an individual who is VI. Fear of the reactions of friends was significant; participants believed that reactions toward their relationship with a partner who is VI would be very negative and might include unease, negative thinking, and even avoidance. Young adults who are sighted were perceived as more likely to date nondisabled individuals than partially sighted or blind peers (Fichten, Goodrick, Amsel, & McKenzie, 1991). In another study, Miller, Chen, Glover-Graf, and Kranz (2009) found that nondisabled college students were essentially unwilling to date or marry anyone with a disability, regardless of the type of disability. However, students were significantly more willing to have platonic friendships with disabled individuals, even when the disability was severe. In addition, nondisabled individuals viewed personal attributes such as high intelligence, kindness, and good humor as desirable traits that may be assistive in forming personal relationships with disabled individuals.

Although some studies were published on mating and romantic behaviours among VI adolescents, only one study examined preferences of those in the initial stages of establishing long-term relationships (Trelfa, 2004). In this study, a group of sighted individuals were compared to a group of individuals who are VI (ages 16–24) using Buss's (2013) mate preferences questionnaires. Two major patterns emerged: First, individuals who are VI desire

the same traits as sighted individuals in long-term romantic partners, though they attach less importance to physical attractiveness. Second, individuals who are VI are generally more selective and attach higher significance to most of the traits, as opposed to sighted individuals (physical attractiveness was an exception, being the only trait rated as significantly less important).

Adolescents who are VI generally tend to have smaller social networks and are less engaged in outdoor activities (Sacks, Wolfe, & Tierney, 1998). They are also less likely to take part in social situations that involve group interactions and, hence, their opportunities for social integration with peers who are sighted are limited, if at all. Consequently, their success in building peer groups is diminished and they usually have fewer friends than those who are sighted (Papadopoulos, Papakonstantinou, Koutsoklenis, Koustriava, & Kouderi, 2015; Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2011). Pinquart and Pfeiffer (2012) reviewed the literature on intimate relationships among adolescents who are VI. They concluded that more difficulties in establishing long-term intimate relations emerge due to: (a) Less opportunity to meet potential mates as they tend to spend more time alone; (b) Inability to visually evaluate potentially interesting partners during social gatherings; (c) Negative reactions when courting peers who are sighted; and (d) Fewer dates resulting in delayed experience of sexual relations for the first time (Kef & Bos, 2006; Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

The current study recognizes that Individuals who are VI may have to negotiate their disability with prospective partners. This understanding is based on Social Exchange Theory, which postulates that social relationships are formed and maintained through a transaction of resources, the product of a social interaction between the involved parties. It was conceptualized by Homans's seminal work, which defined social exchange as the exchange of activities or assets, tangible or intangible, costly or rewarding, between at least two people (Homans, 1958). Blau (1964) had a similar, albeit more utilitarian, version of the theory. In this version, social exchange was defined as 'the reciprocal exchange of extrinsic benefits' which 'may reflect any behavior oriented to socially mediated goals' (pp. 4–5). In essence, the theory states that relationships are analogous to economic tradeoffs of costs and rewards (Homans, 1974). Individuals are assumed to be rational and thus are expected to minimize costs and maximize rewards of being in the relationship (Homans, 1974; Monge & Contractor, 2003; Shtatfeld & Barak, 2009). When an individual concludes that the costs outweigh the rewards, he/she will likely break off the relationship. The theory posits that individuals consider their chances of finding a more suitable alternative relationship, and if these are perceived as high, the likelihood of a break-up increases. Thus, both partners in long-term relationships are assumed to be satisfied with the tradeoff between what they provide and receive, and do not perceive a better alternative to the relationship (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Social exchange exists between partners in romantic relationships; most often men tend to offer social status and seek physically attractive mates, while women (due to lower social position) offer attractive appearance and seek a partner with good financial prospects (Fales et al., 2016; Furnham, 2009; Jonason, 2009; Li, Bailey, Kenrick, & Linsenmeier, 2002). This conceptualization of relationship formation in terms of a market economy (i.e. exchange of traits between partners) is also reflected in the tendency of individuals to self-evaluate their 'market value', which, in turn, affects their mate preferences (Fales et al., 2016). More specifically, persons who

perceive themselves as possessing a high market value (i.e. having desired traits) set higher standards for prospective mates, and vice versa (Lewis & Oppenheimer, 2000; Pawłowski & Dunbar, 1999).

As the evaluation of social exchange outcome and the satisfaction from the relationship are interrelated, the concept of relationship satisfaction should be introduced. Marital or relationship satisfaction is the attitude of greater or lesser favourability toward a person's own marital or long-term relationship. It is commonly evaluated by measuring how content the person is with the partner as a person, as a romantic mate, and with the relationship in general (e.g. Crane, Middleton, & Bean, 2000). Similarity between spouses was found to predict marital satisfaction over time, such that newlyweds who became more similar to one another (i.e. in personality and emotional experience) maintained high marital satisfaction, while couples that became less alike encountered a significant decrease in marital satisfaction (Gonzaga, Campos, & Bradbury, 2007). High relationship-satisfaction has also been shown to mitigate the effects of depressive symptomology and functional limitations in a sample of older adults with poor vision (Bookwala, 2011). However, there are indications that higher divorce rates are present among people with disabilities (Feldman & Ben-Moshe, 2006), a finding that may indicate lower marital satisfaction in this group.

Research Objectives

Both men and women seek physically attractive partners, although, as noted, this is more central to the former (Buss et al., 1990; Conroy-Beam & Buss, 2016; Conroy-Beam et al., 2015; Fales et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2004; Jonason, 2009; Li et al., 2011). It is, therefore, important to study how Individuals who are VI choose their life partner (as they lack or have very limited ability to see the physical traits of a prospective partner). Related research questions, which are the focus of the current study, include: (a) Are different traits sought by them compared to individuals who are sighted? (b) How much importance do they attach to physical attraction? (c) Do they evaluate their romantic relationships as less satisfying?

Informed by Social Exchange Theory (i.e. conceptualizing singles as participants in marriage markets), several hypotheses can be raised. Mating preferences are limited by local conditions. These include available opportunities, perceived mate value for each participant in a marriage market (Gangestad & Simpson, 2000; Schmitt, 2003), and 'other features of social and personal context' (Schmitt, 2003, p. 87). Since adults who are VI are aware that their mate value is lower, they probably expect poorer outcomes from any social exchange with a prospective mate. We, therefore, hypothesize that (H1): Individuals who are VI will be less selective than individuals who are sighted in their mate preferences. More specifically, they will attach significantly lower importance to the characteristics of a potential partner, compared to individuals who are sighted.

Owing to societal pressure on persons who are VI in a romantic relationship (e.g. financial hardships caused by difficulties in finding a suitable job), as well as family and friends' disapproval of a relationship between an individual who is sighted and a spouse who is VI (cf. Fichten et al., 1991; Gill, 1996), we propose the following (H2): Individuals who are VI will rate their relationship satisfaction as significantly lower than individuals who are sighted. (H3) Men who are VI will value physical attractiveness significantly more than women who are VI, while women who are VI will seek good earning capacity from their mates at

significantly higher rates than men who are VI. This hypothesis is based on studies demonstrating gender difference in individuals who are sighted. More specifically, the emphasis put on the appearance of a prospective mate by men and on economic capacity of a prospective mate by women prevails in almost all human societies (as noted earlier). As such, these preferences are assumed to also be prevalent among those who are VI due to the socialization process through interpersonal interactions with socializing agents as well as the mass media.

According to Social Exchange Theory, singles will seek equity in the trade-off between their socio-demographic characteristics and those of their potential partner. Therefore, we hypothesize (H4) that long-term relationships involving individuals who are VI will be characterized by equity in the resulting trade-off, following the exchange of their disability with other disadvantage/s of the partner (e.g. lower socio-economic status).

Methods

Participants

One hundred and six Jewish and Hebrew native-speaking Israeli participants over 18 years of age participated in the study (see [Table 1](#) for socio-demographic data). Fifty-six participants were in long-term romantic relationships at the time of the study. The sample included 55 Individuals who are VI (extremely poor vision or blind) and 51 individuals who are sighted. During the sampling phase there was an effort to match both groups in number, participant age, and gender distribution (correspondingly, the groups did not differ significantly in these variables, as well as ethnic origin; See [Table 1](#)).

Most of the participants who were sighted were university students. However, to achieve a larger variance of ages and backgrounds, an effort was made to recruit participants with varied socio-demographic characteristics (i.e. we directed requests to take part in the study to individuals aged 35 years or older, older than a typical student). Consequently, the socio-demographic characteristics of participants of both groups were similar (see [Table 1](#)).

The study was approved by the ethics committee of the XXX University (the name of the university is to be disclosed after the blind peer review process).

Tools

Buss's Mate Preference Questionnaires

Mate preferences were assessed using two mate preference questionnaires (Buss & Barnes, 1986). One was a standard form that included 18 characteristics. Participants were requested to rate the desirability of each from 0 (irrelevant or undesirable) to 3 (essential). The other was a form presenting 13 qualities that were found to be important to most individuals (e.g. Botwin et al., 1997; Buss et al., 1990; Conroy-Beam & Buss, 2016; Conroy-Beam et al., 2015; Fales et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2004; Jonason, 2009; Li et al., 2011; Trelfa, 2004). Each participant ranked them from 1 (most important) to 13 (least important). To facilitate participant memory of the qualities, the first author read them several times while the participants decided between them.

Table 1. Sample socio-demographic traits by group.

Category/Group	VI (n = 55)	Sighted (n = 51)
Men [n, (%)]	26 (47.3%)	21 (41.2%)
Mean age[(SD)]	34.65 (12.27)	35.37 (12.95)
Ethnic origin		
Africa-Asia	23 (41.8%)	18 (35.3%)
Europe-America	16 (29.1%)	23 (45.1%)
Mixed	13 (23.6%)	10 (19.6%)
Other	3 (5.5%)	

KANSAS Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMSS)

The KMSS is composed of three questions on satisfaction with the spouse as a person, romantic partner, and the relationship in general. It was found to be reliable and valid in numerous studies (e.g. Crane et al., 2000; Schumm et al., 1985; Schumm, Nichols, Schectman, & Grigsby, 1983; Schumm et al., 1986). Correspondingly, Cronbach's Alpha was very high ($\alpha = 0.899$) in the current study.

Open-Ended Questions

The participants who were VI, either single or romantically attached, responded to the following open-ended questions: 'Have you encountered difficulties with finding a romantic partner because of your VI? If so, what were the difficulties?' and 'What can you suggest to ease the finding of a romantic partner by individuals who are VI?' In constructing these questions, they were reviewed by the third author who is a certified rehabilitation psychologist with extensive clinical and research experience in the area of disabilities. Preliminary interviews were conducted with individuals who are VI at the Center for the Blind in Tel-Aviv, Israel, which also helped us in forming these open-ended questions.

Procedure

Participants who were VI were recruited through the "Center for the Blind in Tel-Aviv, Israel. First, clients of the center were approached directly by the first author who inquired regarding their willingness to participate in the study. After four months of collecting data in this manner, we turned to a 'snowball' recruitment technique. All participants who agreed to participate did so voluntarily (compliance rate of 80%). They also confirmed that they have the Israeli blind certificate (i.e. they met official criteria as defined by the Israeli Ministry of Health) and that their visual impairment was not caused by head injury or other neuro-psychiatric disorders. The first author read aloud a consent form to all Participants who were VI and all consented to participate (verbally and by written signature). The first author then repeated to read the questionnaires aloud a few times at the time that the respondent was thinking and deciding between the answers; this was done because it was assumed that it is difficult to remember so many traits without seeing them written. After each response the first author filled out the answers on behalf of them. The full administration time amounted to approximately 50 minutes.

Results

H1 was tested using independent samples t-tests for each of the 18 characteristics in Buss's (2013) mate preference questionnaire. The analyses indicated that only two characteristics (i.e. neatness and chastity) were significantly more important to the participants who were VI compared to participants who were sighted. No significant group differences were found in the importance attached to physical attractiveness ($t_{103} = -0.596$, $p = .553$), as well as the other 15 characteristics assessed by the mate preference questionnaire (Buss, 2013).

See Table 2.

The Mann-Whitney test was used to compare the ranking made by the participants (i.e. the 13 characteristics ranked from 1 to 13, from most important to least important in a long-term romantic partner). Just as in the former questionnaire, the groups ranked only two characteristics as significantly different: 1) Good housekeeping was more important to Participants who were VI and 2) an exciting personality was more important to participants who were sighted. See Table 3.

H2, pertaining to relationship satisfaction, was assessed using an independent samples t-test. The comparison was non-significant ($t_{103} = 0.929$, $p = .357$). In fact, the participants who are VI reported slightly higher satisfaction ($M = 18.59$, $SD = 2.5$, range 3–21) than the sighted participants ($M = 17.97$, $SD = 2.42$).

To assess H3, men and women were compared using independent samples t-tests. Comparisons were performed separately in both groups. The findings indicated that men who are VI valued physical attractiveness ($M = 2.35$, $SD = 0.689$) significantly more than women who are VI ($M = 1.76$, $SD = 0.739$, $t_{53} = 3.037$, $p < .005$). In addition, Women who are VI valued good earning capacity ($M = 2.38$, $SD = 0.622$) significantly more than Men who are VI ($M = 1.88$, $SD = 0.816$, $t_{53} = -2.544$, $p < .05$). No other significant group differences were found. See Figure 1.

Table 2. Means and SD for the group of participants who are VI and the group of participants who are sighted on the buss's 18 traits rating questionnaire (range: 0–3).

Characteristic	Means (SD)- VI (N = 55)	Means (SD)- sighted (N = 50)	T	p
Good cook and housekeeper	1.75 (0.886)	(0.838) 1.46	1.691	.094
Pleasing disposition	(0.854) 2.29	(0.926) 2.20	0.524	.602
Sociability	(0.686) 2.58	(0.542) 2.54	0.344	.731
Similar educational background	(0.938) 1.44	(0.802) 1.64	-1.190	.237
Refinement, neatness	(0.601) 2.56	(0.716) 2.24	2.516	.013*
Good financial prospect	(0.756) 2.15	(0.756) 2.14	0.037	.971
Chastity	(1.122) 1.24	(0.919) 0.82	2.068	.041*
Dependable	(0.000) 3.00	(0.141) 2.98	1.049	.296
Emotional stability and maturity	(0.356) 2.85	(0.328) 2.88	-0.380	.705
Desire for home & children	(1.060) 2.36	(0.749) 2.64	-1.528	.130
Favorable social status	(0.769) 1.24	(0.858) 1.28	-0.275	.784
Good looks	(0.769) 2.04	(0.659) 2.12	-0.596	.553
Similar religious background	(0.981) 2.00	(0.990) 1.80	1.039	.301
Ambition & industriousness	(0.539) 2.47	(0.542) 2.54	-0.637	.526
Similar political attitudes	(1.048) 1.29	(0.904) 1.00	0.516	.133
Mutual attraction, love	(0.189) 2.96	(0.198) 2.96	0.096	.923
Good health	(0.733) 2.38	(0.563) 2.36	0.170	.865
Education & intelligence	(0.715) 2.55	(0.614) 2.48	0.501	.618

Notes

Standard Deviations (SD) appear in parentheses adjacent to the means.

* = $p < .05$

Table 3. Means in Buss's ranking questionnaire by sight ability (range: 1–13).

VI (N = 55)		Sighted (N = 44)		P value
mean ranking	Rank of attribute	mean ranking	Rank of attribute-	
Intelligent (3.31)	1	Intelligent (2.95)	1	.603
Kind and understanding (4.25)	2	Kind and understanding (3.66)	2	.171
Exciting personality (6.71)	6	Exciting personality (4.66)	3	.003**
Physically attractive (5.64)	4	Physically attractive (5.36)	4	.870
Healthy (5.55)	3	Healthy (6.18)	5	.355
Easy-going (6.05)	5	Easy-going (6.36)	6	.598
Wants children (7.15)	7	Wants children (6.82)	7	.625
Good earning capacity (8.04)	10	Good earning capacity (7.80)	8	.620
Good heredity (8.51)	11	Good heredity (8.30)	9	.747
Creative and artistic (7.87)	9	Creative and artistic (8.66)	10	.335
College graduate (9.05)	12	College graduate (9.45)	11	.558
Good housekeeper (7.56)	8	Good housekeeper (9.82)	12	.001***
Religious (11.31)	13	Religious (10.23)	13	.131

Notes

** = $p < .01$ *** = $p < .001$

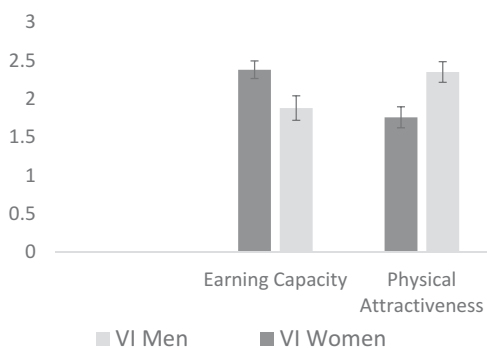


Figure 1. Mean importance attached by participants who are VI to physical attractiveness and good earning capacity by gender.

To assess H4, we subtracted the summed scores of socio-economic parameters (education, ethnic origin, employment and monthly income) of participants who are VI from the summed scores of these parameters of their partners.³ A score < 0 indicated that a participant who is VI had better socio-economic assets than his/her partner. No significant group differences were found using a one-sample t-test for the mean socio-economic difference score (mean difference = 0.381, $t_{20} = 0.722$, $p = .479$). Therefore, we found out that participants who are VI and their partners were similar in socio-economic parameters.

Analyses were performed using SPSS version 21.

Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Questions

General

Of the 55 VI participants who were VI, forty responded to the open-ended questions; the remaining 15 said they have no specific answers. Qualitative analysis of their responses was conducted as follows: A review of content analyses regarding difficulties experienced by disabled individuals informed our coding system. The unit of analysis was

either a single utterance or a full response to each question comprising several sentences as a reference. At the beginning of the process, the first and second authors conducted an initial evaluation aimed at identifying common themes that appeared in the verbal text. This was performed as follows: During an initial coding phase by the first author, the second author recoded a sample of 20% random responses (i.e. assessing inter-rater reliability). Cohen's Kappa statistic was used to evaluate the level of agreement in the coding of the responses (i.e. identification of theme) between the two authors (= 0.88). Ambiguous themes and motifs during the initial coding and cases in which there were disagreements between the authors were discussed until reaching a consensus.

Microanalysis of the text (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was used to detect common themes in participant responses. The process consisted of a systematic line-by-line coding of each question's text by the first and second authors. Data analysis was performed in an iterative mode. More specifically, data from one response was confirmed or contradicted by data from another response. Thematic categories, propositions, and conclusions were, thereby, detected and refined as they emerged from the narratives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Verbal narratives were analysed using Glaser & Strauss's (1967) constant comparison approach to qualitative analysis.

In analysing the questions which inquired about the 10 most desired attributes, we differentiated between individuals who are VI and those who are blind (together with individuals who are sighted three groups were compared). Blind participants mentioned *verbal communication* more frequently as a quality that was important (53.33%), followed by participants who are VI (32.5%), and those who are sighted (25.5%). Second, *honesty & integrity* were rated more important to VI and blind participants (45% and 33%, respectively) in comparison to those who are sighted (25.5%).

Difficulties in Finding a Romantic Partner and Suggestions of How to Find One

Participants noted several reasons for their difficulty in finding a romantic partner. First, rejection by potential partners was immediate (often termed 'automatic' by participants) when they found out about the disability. For instance, a 40-year-old man stated: 'The main difficulties were the prejudices and stereotypes of blind individuals. It [the blindness] created a fear and recoil and they [potential mates] just rejected me before even meeting with me. I would say that I am blind and they would usually just instantly end the conversation.'

Second, participants who are VI noted aspects relating to *visual stimuli and attraction*. Their visual impairment makes it impossible for them to know if they are being observed as well as for them to observe the other person. They noted the difficulty of singles who are VI in approaching prospective partners, as they do not know their physical appearance. For example, a 25-year-old woman said: 'It [the visual impairment] is usually problematic when I meet someone, for example, on a bus, and I don't know what he looks like. Once, someone was hitting on me in a bus for like an hour and a half and eventually he told me that he was married. If I was able to see, surely I would have seen his marriage ring. Also, in a bar, I can't know, on my own, if someone looks good or if he is fat, which is problematic for me. This makes it difficult for me to approach guys.'

Third, Participants who are VI noted that *low confidence and self-esteem* hampers their ability to find suitable mates. The visual impairment makes many of the participants feel 'flawed' and hence they neither initiate nor accept romantic gestures from others. It also makes them feel that they send discouraging signals to potential mates. A 32-years-old woman revealed: 'I used to think that because of my flaw I am poor, miserable, and inadequate, and so I demanded very little from my potential mate-candidates and found it hard to enter a satisfying relationship.'

Fourth, Participants who were VI complained of the *scarcity of suitable dating places*. People in bars and at parties rely heavily on non-verbal communication, since the loud music in many of these places makes communication difficult. In addition, dating websites often request information that reveals the existence of the disability. As participants who are VI noted, they preferred to disclose this information later in a developing relationship. Thus, meeting a potential mate through dating websites was deemed difficult. In addition, some individuals who are VI are light sensitive, limiting dating times to evenings. Others, in contrast, need bright light in order to see well and, therefore, prefer to meet during the daytime. All of these factors limit dating options to a considerable degree. A 39-years-old woman stated: 'Since I don't see well, my entertainment venues and options to meet men, such as pubs, are limited.'

Other reasons mentioned were fear of rejection, inability to drive (mentioned especially by men), relatives trying to introduce them *only* to individuals who are VI (despite willingness to meet potential mates who are sighted), and social pressure on potential partners who are sighted not to meet or continue dating them.

Suggestions to Ease the Finding of a Romantic Mate

Respondents who are VI have proposed social, organizational, and individual changes to improve the relationship prospects of people who are VI. First, they offered to raise social awareness using media campaigns to stress that they are, as one respondent put it, 'just like everyone else'. Second, they highlighted that society needs to increase accessibility to education as well as work and public places where social interaction occurs (e.g. public lectures and cafés) for individuals who are VI. This would thus provide them with more opportunities for meeting potential mates. Third, they proposed that societal organizations arrange gatherings of VI and sighted singles (e.g. lectures, trips, etc.) in order to enable greater social interaction. They also stressed that quiet settings will enable conversations, unlike parties, bars, etc.

Suggestions for improvement were also directed at singles who are VI. First, they need to have self-confidence, accepting and loving one's self, since shame and low self-esteem are major setbacks in attracting a mate. For example, a 24-year-old woman said: 'The most important thing is that you accept and love yourself before you search [for a romantic mate]. You must not enter a relationship as an inferior partner. If you do, people will take advantage of it [the disability].' A 27-year-old man stated: 'If a person decides to be equal, society will have to treat him as such, and it will be easier for him to find a suitable mate. It is important that the person with the disability will not belittle himself or view himself as unworthy.' Second, they should be independent as much as possible, noting that the major fear of individuals who are sighted is that a VI partner will be exceedingly 'needy'. A 30-years-old woman said: 'Men feared I would be needy and clingy. I, therefore, suggest projecting independence, open-mindedness, and a positive attitude. This will attract more

partners than acting miserable.’ Third, they should adopt a positive attitude, accepting others the way they are, and improving skills and positive qualities (e.g. humour, general knowledge, and kindness). A 33-years-old man verbalized this idea: ‘I recommend working on skills, other than sight. These can include conversation skills, humour, etiquette, etc. This way you can have a successful date and put the disability aside.’ Fourth, they are advised to seek romantic partners in places where conversing is feasible (e.g. in an intimate café) in order to highlight their favourable qualities while downplaying their disability. Fifth, they would benefit from mingling, working, and volunteering within the general population. Other suggestions included searching for mates who are sensitive and compassionate, handling rejection with composure, and carefully choosing the timing in which to disclose their disability.

Discussion

The current study contributes to the literature on disability and VI by focusing on mate preferences among adults who are VI, their relationship satisfaction, and presumed social exchange tradeoffs in romantic companionships. In contrast to what might be expected based on Social Exchange Theory, the main findings suggest that both Individuals who are VI and those who are sighted value the characteristics of an ideal romantic partner in a similar manner. The findings also indicate that, similar to individuals who are sighted, men who are VI value physical attractiveness more and earning capacity less than women who are VI. Furthermore, the findings do not support social exchange tradeoffs between Individuals who are VI and their partners. Specifically, VI was not ‘compensated’ by coupling with individuals of lower socio-economic status.

The current study goes hand in hand with abundant empirical evidence showing that individuals are attracted to romantic partners who are similar to them (Botwin et al., 1997; Buss & Barnes, 1986; Byrne, 1971; Penton-Voak, Perrett, & Peirce, 1999). Moreover, attraction between partners is predicted by perceived similarity, more than actual similarity (Tidwell, Eastwick, & Finkel, 2013). Our study demonstrated that even when one partner is VI and the other is sighted, the socio-economic attributes of the partners tend to be similar. However, this finding seemingly contradicts the rationale of Social Exchange Theory. Nevertheless, this seeming contradiction can be resolved. For example, a self-selection effect might be at work, whereby mostly well-adjusted and functioning participants who were VI (i.e. people with relatively good physical, emotional, and financial status) agreed to participate in the study. It is also possible that some of the partners are ‘flawed’ in other aspects which were not assessed in the current study (e.g. low self-esteem due to a homely [i.e. unattractive] outward appearance).

Participants who are VI ranked the qualities of neatness, chastity, and good housekeeping more highly than participants who are sighted. This could stem from a need for certainty and control. With their eyesight impaired, participants reported that they sometimes feel a lack of control in various domains. Living with a neat, chaste, and good housekeeper can provide a sense of composure and control, at least with regard to bodily sensitivity and locations of objects in the house. Cleanliness is assumed to prevent diseases, while tidiness and neatness may be helpful in avoiding falls as a result of objects scattered in the house. Together, these could enhance these participants’ emotional, mental, and physical sense of safety and security.

Contrary to expectations, relationship satisfaction of individuals who are VI was not lower than that of individuals who are sighted. Two explanations can account for this. First, downward social comparison theory posits that persons can enhance their subjective well-being through comparison with those who are less fortunate (Suls & Wheeler, 2013; Wills, 1981). It is possible that participants who are VI in long-term romantic relationships compared themselves to individuals who are VI who did not manage to find a mate (note, in this regard, the low VI marriage rates in Korsia & Gleitman, 2008). Consequently, this might have led to higher ratings of relationship satisfaction. Second, the ‘paradox of choice’ is a phenomenon manifested when consumers presented with numerous options are less satisfied than those presented with fewer options (Iyengar & Lepper, 2000; Schwartz, 2004). A related phenomenon relevant to our findings is that of fear of missing out (FOMO), the desire to keep up with enjoyable and beneficial activities and experiences believed to be part of other people’s lives (Przybylski, Murayama, DeHaan, & Gladwell, 2013). The large mating options of individuals who are sighted may, in some cases, result in FOMO (i.e. fear of missing out on potentially better partners). In contrast, individuals who are VI have fewer options and may, therefore, be more satisfied with their choice of mate. This aligns with the rationale of Social Exchange Theory, according to which partners in a long-term relationship are assumed to be satisfied only when there is a good trade-off between what they provide and receive *and* do not believe they have a better mating alternative (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

It has been long known that men attach higher significance to physical attractiveness and women attach greater emphasis to financial earnings (Botwin et al., 1997; Buss et al., 1990; Conroy-Beam & Buss, 2016; Conroy-Beam et al., 2015; Fales et al., 2016; Fletcher et al., 2004; Jonason, 2009; Li et al., 2011). To our knowledge, this research is the first to demonstrate that these gender differences also exist within the VI community. We propose that this is a result of socialization for mate preferences, which was internalized by both VI and sighted individuals (Buunk, Park, & Dubbs, 2008; Salska et al., 2008). Men internalized the societal rewards of marrying an attractive woman, while women internalized a preference for mates with good financial prospects.

Individuals who are VI valued verbal communication skills as well as honesty and integrity of a prospective partner more frequently than individuals who are sighted. Understandably, as their sight is impaired, they rely more heavily on other senses, primarily hearing (Gougoux, Zatorre, Lassonde, Voss, & Lepore, 2005). Thus, they want their partner to be as communicative as possible. In addition, their visual impairment may lead them to value easily comprehensible and reliable verbal messages by their partner.

Participants who are VI shared with us their difficulties in finding a mate. Negative stigmata, inability to use visual stimuli, low confidence and self-esteem, shortage of suitable meeting places, and light sensitivity are considerable impediments in choosing, as well as being chosen by, prospective mates. Based on their suggestions, we propose the following recommendations: First, self-confidence and independence can be bolstered by psychological therapies as well as physical/technological aids. These, in turn, enhance coping with the disability (Lifshitz, Hen, & Weisse, 2007; Wong, Guymer, Hassell, & Keeffe, 2004). Second, societal organizations, including the ministry of welfare and social services, can conduct campaigns aimed at diminishing negative stigmas as well as

providing accessibility to work, education, and social venues. They can also arrange gatherings for VI singles with those who are sighted. Notably, these measures should specifically target VI women, who are more likely to remain single or get divorced (Feldman & Ben-Moshe, 2006; Korsia & Gleitman, 2008).

Building upon recommendations provided by researchers who studied VI adolescents, we propose several suggestions aimed at increasing the likelihood of individuals who are VI to find romantic mates. Some scholars recommended programs that include support groups for increasing positive forms of social support. Such programs could also include support groups for family members and other individuals that interact with individual who are VI (cf. Papadopoulos et al., 2015). Others advised that individuals who are VI can benefit from programs designed for enhancing personal and social skills. They could, thereby, increase their ability to form good social contacts, including romantic ones (with either individuals who are VI or those who are sighted) (Kef & Bos, 2006; Miller et al., 2009; Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2012). Some researchers highlighted the need for individuals who are VI to be more self-confident, courageous, and have an internal locus of control. These attributes are especially important considering their fears of rejection by a potential partner. Encouragement by significant members in their personal lives, such as parents, siblings, or guides and teachers can enhance these attributes (Hadidi & Al-Khateeb, 2014; Kef & Bos, 2006). Encouragement by friends to simply get out more and interact with peers and other single persons seems important as well (Kef & Bos, 2006; Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2012). Notably, suggestions on how to improve the chances of finding a mate offered by scholars who studied adolescents who are VI are very similar to those directed by our adult participants to other VI people.

Some limitations of the study bear mentioning. First, only socio-economic variables were examined in the current study. Other manifestations of social exchange (i.e. other 'flaws' of the sighted partner) might have been overlooked, leading us to erroneously conclude that no trade-off exists in these relationships as predicted by Social Exchange Theory. Such flaws can include other types of disabilities, psychiatric disorders, and other chronic illnesses. Second, the administration method of the questionnaire forms differed between groups and may have influenced the findings (e.g. as a result of social desirability). Participants who were VI responded to questions that were read aloud to them, while participants who were sighted filled out the forms by themselves. The scant literature on mating preferences of individuals who are VI calls for further research. Future studies using a similar methodology but with a larger sample size will enable comparisons between individuals who are VI and those who are blind, as well as other comparisons of interest (e.g. between couples who met before VI onset and those who met after it, between born and acquired VI, between different circumstances of VI acquisition, between singles and non-singles, etc.).

Conclusion

Our research findings imply that in the realm of mate preferences and relationship satisfaction, individuals who are VI demonstrate similar patterns to those of individuals who are sighted. Two indicators suggest that individuals who are VI demand and receive equitable social exchange with prospective or current romantic partners: 1) Their mate

preferences seem to reflect a positive self-esteem with regard to their mate value and 2) Similar relationship satisfaction to sighted individuals implies that they do not feel forced to compromise for a non-satisfying romantic relationship. The relationship satisfaction of individuals who are VI did not significantly differ from, and was even slightly higher than, individuals who are sighted. In addition, both individuals who are VI and sighted individuals seem to have similar mate preferences. However, individuals who are VI reported experiencing many difficulties in finding a long-term romantic mate, partially due to negative social stigma and low self-esteem. These problems may be solved by raising social awareness, as well as through individual therapy. The existing scholarship on individuals who are VI lacks a thorough examination of their difficulties in finding mates. Our study enables their voices to be heard on this important matter. We hope that the present article has brought to light some theoretical, as well as practical issues, and hence will aid individuals who are VI in forming and sustaining long-term romantic relationships.

Notes

1. VI refers to both low vision and total blindness; (Hadidi & Al Khateeb, 2014; Kef & Bos, 2006; Papadopoulos et al., 2015; Pinquart & Pfeiffer, 2011).
2. In the current study, 'partners' relates to life partners, either married or cohabiting, as well as romantic companions who do not share the same household.
3. Note that none of the participants who were VI had a partner who was VI.

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Disclosure statement

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